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ABSTRACT

Since 1978, Memorial University of Newfoundland (Canada) has offered preservice and inservice teacher education courses to seven isolated Native communities in Labrador. The courses may lead to a 2-year degree with teacher certification or to a 5-year baccalaureate degree. Students are usually Native teachers and teacher aides in community all-grade schools; female, 25-35 years of age, and married with children; and of two distinct cultural groups, Inuit and Innu. Over the years, many approaches to course delivery have been tried. Instructors have flown to a host community for a 6-week or two 3-week sessions. This method allowed direct student-teacher interaction, but required accommodation in the community for the instructor and students from other communities. Correspondence study was tried unsuccessfully. Teleconferencing has been used successfully, particularly with students with more experience of university course work. Combinations of delivery methods can be the best approach. Difficulties include lack of basic texts, supplies, and reference materials in communities; scarcity of good instructors who can relate to Native people and are familiar with distance education methods; scheduling that accommodates schools, communities, and families; harsh winter weather; and language differences. Teleconferencing success has been enhanced by increased teleconferencing time, prior contact between instructor and students, community contacts and support persons, use of facsimile machines and collect telephone calls to increase student contact, prudent hiring of on-site tutors, use of Native people as resources, and hiring substitutes to cover students' duties in community schools. (SV)

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Successfully Implementing a Native Teacher Education Program through Distance Education in Labrador

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Introduction

Labrador, a relatively small, but significant part of Canada's north with an area of about 295,000 square kilometres is home for two distinct (based on culture and language) Native groups: the Innu of Sheshatshit and Davis Inlet; and the Inuit and Native-Settlers of the north-eastern coastal communities of Rigolet, Postville, Makkovik, Hopedale and Nain. With the exception of Sheshatshit, all of these communities are geographically isolated, separated by virtually impassable terrain and accessible only by air year round and by coastal boat for a few weeks in the summer and early fall. The winter climate is harsh and the summers short. Population varies from a high of about 950 in Nain to 220 in Postville. Language spoken differs within each community, with the use of English being most widespread. However, the use of one or the other of the Native languages is dominant in some areas, with some of the population being practically unilingual. The primary livelihood of the people is one based on the fishery supplemented by some hunting and trapping, with more recently in Nain, the development of a commercial caribou hunt.

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Each community has an all-grade school organized by school boards under the Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education. The curriculum is basically similar to that found elsewhere in the province, but with some distinct cultural, and particularly language differences. There are courses in Innutut in Inuit community schools, and in Naskapi-Montagnais (Innu-ai-mun as it is called in Sheshatshit) in the Innu schools. The development and use of Native languages in schools has grown in recent years, particularly with the introduction of immersion type programs in the lower grades in Nain and Sheshatshit. There are a mix of Native and non-native teachers in the schools, as well as a number of Native student teachers, or teacher aides as they are sometimes called.

Within each community there is at least one audio tele-conference site which is linked through a dedicated fully interactive provincial network to the centre in St. John's. Some sites also have more sophisticated equipment such as electronic blackboards as part of the tele-conference system. There is also an accessible facsimile machine located somewhere in each community. Almost all students can also be contacted by telephone. These resources have greatly facilitated distance education efforts, since mail service has proven to be unreliable in the past, especially in the winter months, as a means of communicating with students and other people involved with the programs.

Teacher Education

The need for well qualified Native teachers for Labrador schools has long been recognised, not only to provide the necessary cultural elements as part of the Native childrens' education, but to also provide a stable teaching population in schools where 50 - 90% annual teacher turnover among non-native teachers was (and still is) all too common. Also, Federal/Provincial funding had made provision for Native people to be hired as classroom teacher aides. Such people were an ideal target population for a teacher preparation program.

In 1977-78 Memorial University of Newfoundland developed the field based 20 course (2 year) Teacher Education Program in Labrador (TEPL). This was done through an advisory committee comprised of representatives from the Federation of Newfoundland Indians, the Naskapi-Montagnais Innu Association, the Labrador Inuit Association, the provincial Department of Education, and Memorial University. The program received University Senate approval in 1978, and courses have been offered, in Labrador, since that time. The courses have been specifically developed to meet the needs of Native teachers, and include 14 courses in Education and six in other

academic areas such as Linguistics and English. All courses carry regular Memorial University credit, and most are transferable to other programs. Graduation from the program with a Diploma in Native and Northern Education has enabled a number of students to obtain provincial certification and become qualified classroom teachers.

Approximately 10 years later the need for a degree program that would enable this group to further upgrade their professional qualifications was established. Considerable input was obtained from the students, the schools and school boards in Labrador, Native organisations, and the various departments at the University. A five year Baccalaureate degree (B.Ed.in Native and Northern Education) was approved in 1987, and although it contains unique provisions that further address the needs of Native people, it is considered equivalent to the other under graduate degrees in education offered by Memorial University. Many courses on this program have also been offered to date through distance education techniques.

Student entrance into TEPL and the B.Ed. (N&N) program is through a regular application to the University and a specific application to either program. Students must have either completed high school matriculation requirements, or be eligible to enter University through the mature student clause.

Program Organization

The programs are administered from the main university campus in St. John's through a Coordinator of Native Education within the Faculty of Education. Both are field based programs with the intent that most of the courses be offered off campus in Labrador and in, as far as is feasible, the communities where the students reside. Also, for the most part, courses are offered separately to the Innu and Inuit/Native-Settler groups due to linguistic and cultural differences.

The Native and Northern Coordinator makes periodic visits to the students in the communities involved with the program, and also maintains contact by telephone at other times. Within Labrador, use is also made of field coordinators (one representing the Innu group, and one the Inuit/Native-Settler group), and of a contact person in each community. The field coordinators assist, among other things, with the details of setting-up and scheduling of courses in Labrador. Both levels of coordinator use the community contact person to keep in touch with the students and relay

messages back and forth. Such a communication system has worked extremely well over the last few years.

Outside input into the program is obtained through two different committees: one an Academic Committee comprised of representatives from each of the academic departments across the University that offers courses on the programs; the other, an Advisory Committee on Native and Northern Education, which is comprised of members representing the students in the program, the school boards in Labrador, the Native organisations, the Department of Education, as well as Memorial University Faculty of Education. The latter committee is chaired by the Coordinator of Native and Northern Education and typically meets four or five times a year in Labrador. All aspects of the programs, including the effectiveness of course delivery methods are often discussed at such meetings.

To maintain the academic integrity of the programs, all course offerings including instructors hired to do the teaching, need the approval of the respective University departments. For example, if a Native language course is to be offered, then approval is required from the Linguistics Department. Also, if the instructor was not a regular faculty member at Memorial, then the department concerned would assign one of its members to liase with the instructor with respect to such things as course content and evaluation.

Student Characteristics

Most of the students in the programs are female, 25-35 years of age, married and have children. All are residents of one of the seven communities listed earlier. Most did not go beyond grade 10 in high school, and so entered their university program as "mature students". Approximately 80% of them work full-time in the school system either as teachers (these would be mostly TEPL graduates), or as teacher aides, or, in two instances as school administrators. Most will have had a number of years experience as teacher aides working with regular classroom teachers prior to starting their first university course. At any point in the program over the past several years, each student would have accumulated a varying number of course credits since they started the program at different times, and did not always take advantage of courses offered in their particular community. The students have varying degrees of English language proficiency, however, for almost all of the Inuit/Native-Settlers, English is their declared first language. For the Innu, the first language is more typically Montagnais and English Language proficiency varies widely.

Program Delivery

Delivery of these field based programs has been a constant challenge over the past 12 years. When planning the individual courses many variables obviously have to be taken into account including courses needed, availability of instructors, scheduling, student work (teaching) and home commitments, resources needed, mode of delivery, curriculum content, accommodation if instructor or students relocate temporarily for a course, as well as all of the student, cultural and geographic considerations previously discussed. On top of this, University regulations have to be considered and taken into account, a fact that students living far from a campus they typically have never visited or attended have a problem comprehending. Also from an administrative perspective, the numbers of students in each community were small, making it more feasible and economical to offer a course to a group of students from many of the communities at one time. Also, during some course delivery schemes, it was, and continues to be more beneficial and productive, to offer more than one course at a time.

There is no panacea as far as program or course delivery is concerned. However, many approaches have been tried, and some have worked better than others. In the first years of the program, instructors were flown into a selected community for a period of six weeks to deliver a course directly to the students. This, in a more common use of the term, is probably not considered distance education by many, but rather education at distance. However, it had many advantages, not the least of which was to allow direct student - teacher interaction as well as after class tutorial work. This approach was also facilitated by freeing the students from their teacher aide duties for an hour or two each afternoon at the end of the school day to take the courses. The school board and school administration were often very cooperative in this regard. However, as a way of delivering courses, it did have disadvantages. It often entailed students from other communities travelling and boarding in the selected community, thus having to leave their families for several weeks. Attracting suitably qualified instructors was also a problem with this approach, since it would mean them staying in the community for the duration of the course. Few professors from the University were available to do this due to on-campus commitments.

One variation of this approach was to break the course into two three week sessions with a break in between that allowed both students who had travelled to the course and the instructor to return home. The break also allowed time for reading and work on other assignments. Contact could be maintained by phone, and,or the occasional tele-conference session.

Another variation was to offer courses a four week, rather than six week block of time in a more centralised location such as Goose Bay, Labrador, during the first few weeks after school finished. Accommodation had to be arranged for the students (and their families who chose to accompany them) as well as day care facilities for the children.

Correspondence was tried as another way to offer courses. This well recognized distance education technique has been employed at Memorial to deliver credit courses on other programs for many years. Considerable lead time is required to prepare and, or adapt course material for this approach. Unfortunately, correspondence course delivery to students on the Native Teacher program did not work out well, and in fact was a dismal failure. Although some students were successful, most were not able to muster the self discipline required to keep up with their individual study and assignments, and they were often distracted from working on the course by the many other events in their lives as mature married people with family responsibilities. Even the availability of locally employed tutors was not an inducement. In particular, it seemed that if the informal leader within a student group in a community decided to quit a particular course, then it was not long before the rest of the group also dropped the course.

Tele-conference has been used a number of times, particularly with the students working on their degree program. Such students, graduates of the TEPL program, have more experience with university course work, and are more easily able to adapt to the system. Also, it should perhaps be mentioned that most of the graduates, being qualified teachers with their own classrooms, are not easily freed up from their school commitments and therefore have to take courses after school hours. This is not always convenient for them, but few alternatives are available. Tele-conference has worked most successfully when the instructors concerned are known to the students through teaching other courses, on site, in the community. Success is further enhanced by having the courses specifically designed for the program and for delivery by distance education. This incurs additional preparation costs that need to be considered when planning program delivery.

Combinations of the previous delivery methods can, at times be the best approach to take. Partial on-site instruction can be supplemented, for example, by tele-conference sessions if the instructor is not able to stay in the community for the whole duration of a course. The system can also be used to "bring in" guest speakers, as well as be used for group tutorial work. There are many possibilities.

Difficulties (Challenges)

One of the most common problems confronting program delivery, regardless of the technique used was, and continues to be, the lack of resources in each community to support courses from an academic perspective. All reference material often needs to be supplied, and ideally in place prior to the course starting, together with basic texts and supplies. Reality though, often meant that mail service and, or adverse weather prevented this. If an instructor, or one of the Coordinators happened to be visiting the community around course start-up time, then they would be able to take material with them (if the plane wasn't already over loaded). Occasionally, a student or instructor would call the main campus with a request to send up packets of paper for duplicating since the school had simply run out of this basic commodity. It is difficult to anticipate all eventualities.

Another real challenge concerns the hiring of suitable course instructors. The people hired need to be both acceptable to the academic department concerned as well as have the ability to relate to the Native people and do a good job of teaching. Good instructors have been difficult to find. Occasionally, a local teacher meets the necessary requirements and is able to teach a course in the community, and some have done an excellent job. However, their role as classroom teachers and professional staff room colleagues of the Native students during the day conflicts with their temporary evening role as an instructor, exacerbated by the small community environment in which they all reside.

Another facet of instructor hiring, whether they be regular on- campus faculty or from outside the University community is that of familiarity with distance education delivery. Not all instructors are able to adapt to this and change their preferred style of teaching. For example, a person who employs a lecturing technique on the tele-conference system, and who found it difficult to adapt to a discussion approach, would find it difficult to maintain student attention for very long. Also, tele-conference delivery is considerably enhanced by the use of graphics, good support material, and applications which involve technology such as the electronic chalkboard.

When to offer courses has also been a constant issue. Scheduling is necessary that anticipates most of the school, church based and other events in the communities. Certain times of the year are also better than others. For example, the Innu group have recently told us that they would prefer not to have courses during the summer. Use of appropriate time slots during evening tele- conference sessions is important. The best times were found to be those later in the evening, after supper when family responsibilities have been taken

care of. A seemingly small issue, but one that could change course outcomes for the better.

Winter travel has often impeded course offerings and coordinator travel. On one memorable occasion, an instructor left St. John's to travel to one of the communities to teach a course. The next day a phone call was received from the instructor giving the message that she was stranded in a nearby community and the plane had returned to Goose Bay due to heavy snowfall further up the coast. Two weeks later she was still in the same community waiting for the snow to stop and the plane return. Weather hold-ups are all too common during certain times of the year on the Labrador coast and can play havoc with the best of plans.

One final challenge of a different kind should perhaps be mentioned. Courses are delivered in English, and for a number of Innu students in particular, this has presented some difficulties which have been solved on some occasions by having a translator present. On others, the more fluent students have taken on this role and assisted with translation. Given this situation, almost no use has been made of true distance techniques, and courses have been delivered through on-site instruction to the Innu group.

Techniques for Increasing Success

Some of these have already been alluded to above, for example, appropriate scheduling for tele-conference courses, providing a break during courses offered in the community, and having all support material on hand. However, there are many other things that can help increase the chances of success of a particular course as well as the program as a whole.

Tele-conference has been considerably enhanced as a delivery method by doing a number of things in addition to hiring instructors who can use a variety of techniques on the system. One has been to double the amount of time typically made available on the tele- conference system for teaching a course. This provides the chance for much more discussion and time for some tutorial work. The other has been to encourage the instructor to visit the students in the different communities prior to course start up to: (a) meet and talk with the students and, most importantly, allow them to get to know the instructor; and (b) deliver course material and resources and start the course off. This obviously adds to the cost of course delivery, but without that initial first personal contact, most students would be reluctant to interact on the tele-conference system. The meeting is also beneficial to the instructor, especially if its their first time teaching a course on the program. Even for

busy university professors, there is often time before semesters start to do this kind of thing without disrupting their on-campus teaching. Finally, a third and seemingly very obvious thing to do, is make sure that the tele-conference site in each community is properly set-up and ready for the sessions ahead of class time. A person can be hired to do this, or it can be accomplished by one of the students, but it is important. During one winter course it was realised that students were not attending at one of the centres. Upon investigation, it was found that no one was turning the heat on in the building ahead of time and it was simply too cold for students to sit and take the sessions.

All modes of delivery have been improved by the use of the facsimile machine. As a means of communicating, it has helped considerably with everything from straightening out application procedures and documentation to providing course sites, regardless of distance education methodology, with resources, getting assignments to and from students with considerable expediency, and providing on-site community contacts with course organisation details. However, on a note of caution, the faxing of examination for administration in a community has to be handled carefully and the location of the facsimile machine within the community taken into account.

The use of collect phone calls to the main campus has been encouraged, especially from students and field coordinators. This results in more frequent communication, and can be used to quickly clear up questions about courses and course planning. Over the years, we have found that students have not abused this privilege.

As mentioned earlier, there are identified contact people in each community. These are people who can easily talk to the students and arrange on-site course details. They are given a small stipend each year for their services, although indications are, that most would willingly help for nothing. Shortly after community contacts were first put in place, we wondered why it had not been done years before since it considerably enhanced the communication process.

The use of on-site tutors for any of the course delivery methods has met with varying degrees of success. Hired to assist the Native students, such people, even though well qualified, have not always been accepted by the students. Reasons for this have been difficult to ascertain, but primarily, it might have something to do with the fact that the only people typically available have been the non-Native school teachers in the community. The hiring of people as tutors has to be done with much prudence.

By contrast, the use of Native people as resource people for the courses (in addition to the regular instructor) has worked out extremely well with both Native groups. Such people have been particularly beneficial in the offering of Native language courses, and courses that particularly involve Native culture. Also, in addition to enhancing the success of the course, it has been a boost to the self-esteem of the assistantsed who themselves are often students on the degree program.

One last technique should perhaps be mentioned that has helped to boost the success of the courses. It has involved hiring substitute teachers to replace the students, freeing them up from their regular classroom duties during the day and enabling them to work on University courses. Such an option can be used for part of, or the whole duration, of a course. It is not a cheap option, and it is sometimes difficult for the school to find suitably qualified substitutes, however, it does enable the student to focus their attention more fully on the course material. Also, it can help facilitate the offering of more than one course at a time.

Comments by Students

A recent evaluation of the use of the tele-conference system to deliver courses on the Native teacher education programs in Labrador revealed that student reaction to the system was mixed. Some liked it because it did not interrupt their teaching schedule in school and because they did not have to leave home (the community) to take the courses. Some simply enjoyed using the system and the freedom it provided to take part in class discussions. Others found it difficult to interact with the instructor without the face-to-face contact. Such variation probably isn't unique to this group of students, but typical of any class of mature adult students with varied preferred learning styles.

Summary

Delivering field based programs will always be a challenge, and the Native teacher education ones in Labrador are no exception to this. The need to be cognizant of the unique nature of the program, the student characteristics, the languages and culture, and the constraints imposed by the geography and climate will always be present.

Having instructors teach the various courses in the community is a good way to offer the programs and is preferred by most students. However this method is not always viable, and the alternative of various distance education methods

then becomes attractive. Some of these methods have been more successful than others, and most can be enhanced by attention to detail and the use of supplementary resources. This may result, at times, in a more eclectic approach to distance education to produce the desired outcomes, but it is well justified. Future advances in distance education technology and their application in the field is likely to have the potential to further increase the success of programs such as these.

On a final note, it should perhaps be mentioned that many of the elements of program delivery discussed here are perhaps generic to a wide range of education, training and other developmental activities in remote regions.